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SUBJECT: SUCCESSFUL PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION IN COMOROS

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 519;
b) ANTANANARIVO 473 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) This cable is the first of a three-part cable; it describes the inauguration of Union of the Comoros President Sambi, attended by the U.S. Presidential Delegation. The second cable describes the Delegation's meetings with and assessment of the new government. The third cable provides suggestions for U.S. policy toward the new democratic government of the Comoros.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY. Representatives from many governments and international organizations traveled to Moroni, Union of the Comoros, for the historic May 26 inauguration of President Sambi. The diverse delegations pledged friendship and support on the occasion of the Comoros' first democratic transition. Outgoing President Azali was present and addressed the gathering. Raucous applause met Sambi's inaugural address, in which he repeated many of the aspirations from his campaign and vowed to bring justice and development to the Comoros. Overall the event came off remarkably well given the extraordinary circumstances. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) The week after his decisive electoral victory (reftels), Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi was officially inaugurated as Comoran President in a festival-like ceremony May 26. The peaceful and democratic transfer of power from former President Azali Assoumani to President Sambi was the first in Comoros' 31-year history. A Presidential Delegation led by USAID Deputy Director Frederick W. Schieck, including USAID Counselor Mosina Jordan and Ambassador James D. McGee attended the inauguration and associated events. The U.S. presence was enhanced by the attendance of Rear Admiral Richard W. Hunt, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and his staff, and EmbOffs.

¶4. (SBU) Given the fragile authority of the 2002 constitution, and despite earning 58 percent of the vote, Sambi and company were eager for the international legitimacy best embodied by official recognition by the United States. That this came in the form of a senior Presidential Delegation to the Comoros on behalf of

President Bush himself, was enormously gratifying to the new leader of the "poor, neglected Comoros."

Regional Leaders Turn Up To Salute Sambi

¶5. (U) In addition to the well-received U.S. Delegation, attendees included: Madagascar Prime Minister Sylla, a former Mauritian PM, the Tanzanian Vice President, the South African Deputy Foreign Minister, and senior officials from the International Francophonie Organization (OIF), Arab League, African Union (AU), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), United Nations and a dozen other countries. Iran, Libya, and Saudi Arabia sent substantial delegations of accredited diplomats and officials from capitals.

¶6. (U) Official speakers sought to outdo each other to highlight cultural, historic, or linguistic ties to the Comoros. Demonstrating Comoros' complex heritage and relations to many countries, speeches included parts in Comoran, French, English, Arabic, Malagasy, and Swahili. GOM PM Sylla quoted a former Malagasy President saying Comoros was "the 19th tribe of Madagascar." The Tanzanian VP began in Swahili, from which much of the Comoran language is drawn, citing centuries-old commercial links.

¶7. (SBU) Of particular note was the South African speech. In addition to congratulating Comoros for successful elections, Sambi for winning, and Azali for stepping aside - as most did - South Africa also called for the "emancipation of women" so that development could be realized. Summoning the notion of South Africa's struggle for equality, and this year marking 50 years in the fight for gender equity, the

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Vice Foreign Minister made repeated and blunt appeals for Comoran women to be made equal partners in development. (Note: Part Two has Sambi's cabinet line-up, which includes one female Minister. End Note).

Azali Gracious and Defiant

¶8. (U) Speaking briefly in French, former President Azali was gracious to his arch-rival and successor. Then switching quickly to Comoran, he turned defiant, asking forgiveness for any "mistakes" he had made - a loud voice from the dark cried, "It's too late!" There was raucous reaction from the Comorans as Azali spoke which could easily be mistaken for applause; in fact they were jeering the man whom many felt had achieved so little. Despite this outcry, Azali spoke with vigor before stepping aside for good.

Sambi Eloquent, Confident, With a Warning

¶9. (U) Beginning in Arabic and Comoran, President Sambi stirred the crowd to exultation with his renowned powers of oration. He spoke naturally, with several references to Muslim values, thanking all those who had voted for him. In Comoran he warned he would investigate "secrets" in the coming weeks (referring to corrupt activities) and would hold people to account. He called on all Comorans to accept justice as corrupt officials and criminals were identified and charged. Sambi thanked Azali, but mentioned his name exactly once to spare his predecessor the taunts responding to his name.

¶10. (U) Changing to French Sambi read a prepared text, emphasizing stability, well-being, and unity in Comoros. He thanked all foreign partners, naming South Africa, Mauritius, China, France, Madagascar, Tanzania, the United States, AU, UN, Arab League, EU, OIF, and OIC. He vowed to respect the constitution and honor Comoros' international obligations in the areas of peace, human rights, the environment, terrorism, and organized crime.

¶11. (U) While the French portion was interrupted at several points where rain appeared to have blotted his text, it also included a soaring rhetorical segment on the nature of his faith. "If to be an Islamist is to uphold Comoran values, I am Islamist. If to be an Islamist is to be committed to justice, I am an Islamist... to be a good Muslim does not mean one is fundamentalist (or extremist)."

Well Run For Last Minute On No Budget

¶12. (SBU) A core group of multilingual Comoran protocol officials pulled the inauguration off with a week to plan and virtually no resources. All delegations received personal invitations, greetings on arrival, and send-offs on departure. Arrival and seating at the Presidential Palace, albeit under a decrepit and fraying tarp, was orderly and according to protocol.

¶13. (SBU) The inauguration ceremony itself began and ended, remarkably, on time, as many visiting speakers were efficiently ushered past the podium. Pouring water through seams and holes in the tarp disrupted the VIPs once or twice, while thousands of Comorans behind them braved the elements to see their chosen President take office. President Sambu solemnly took his oath of office before the High Constitutional Court, then immediately descended to his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground in the traditional position of Muslim prayer. As he took his seat to await his two Vice Presidents' turn to be sworn in, one of his young daughters sprang from the crowd and landed in his lap, held tightly by her father for the next 20 minutes of the proceedings.

¶14. (U) Deputy Administrator Schieck and Counselor Jordan

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cleared on the general substance of this message before their departure from Comoros.

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